



# Agents of Their Own Success: Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination for Students With Disabilities in the Era of Personalized Learning

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by the National Center for Learning Disabilities



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Over the last three years, NCLD has led a national effort to examine the opportunities and challenges faced by students with disabilities in personalized learning environments.**

We reviewed academic literature on this growing trend, held webinars, commissioned a survey, convened meetings with disability experts, personalized learning advocates, and educators, and published initial findings. We conducted a rigorous analysis of efforts in three states, interviewed close to 100 leaders, studied individual cases and met with local, state and national audiences.

A theme that consistently emerged was that personalized learning requires students to make good choices about their learning, assert their needs and pursue their goals in order to be successful. These skill sets are vital for all learners, but they are especially important for students with disabilities. Yet these skills are not frequently taught to students, an omission that harms those who need these skills the most.

To address this concern, in 2017 NCLD promoted a national conversation on how to ensure that students with disabilities gain self-advocacy skills and the capacity to exercise self-determination in personalized learning environments. We adopted a research-based definition of self-advocacy as a set of skills based on self-knowledge, including awareness of personal strengths and limitations, knowledge of one's rights and the ability to communicate this understanding. We accepted the view of self-determination as an empowered state in which individuals take charge of their lives, make choices in their self-interest and freely pursue their goals.

These capacities are crucial to success in postsecondary education, the workforce and civic life. They should be woven into the way all students are taught, and never considered mere



“add-ons.” Personalized learning, which places greater emphasis on student decision making and agency, should offer many ways to support these abilities, in an environment of high expectations and respect for all.

Yet in the actual practice of education, even in personalized learning, many students are denied these opportunities, and NCLD's work suggests the opportunity gap is widening. Even when education policies lay out a student-centered approach that embraces individuality, the vision may fall short in practice. The mindset of educators can undermine well-meaning efforts to implement personalized learning, such as when teachers focus on a student's weaknesses

rather than strengths. Another challenge arises from stigma and low expectations of students with disabilities, which may be held by educators, families and even students themselves.

For all these reasons, it is essential that students with disabilities learn how to be their own champions, through developing self-advocacy skills and exercising self-determination.

To support that aim, NCLD held three virtual meetings between April and June of 2017 with a group of 38 advisors, including special education experts, personalized learning specialists, teachers, parents, students and advocates. These discussions culminated in a daylong conference on August 3, 2017, where we gained insights on how to improve the system.

Three policy and action themes emerged from this process. Taken together, they can ensure that self-advocacy skills and self-determination are woven into learning for all students and supported by a full range of engaged stakeholders:

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### **ACTION 1:**

**Make self-advocacy skills and self-determination critical priorities in personalized learning systems.** We must communicate and demonstrate which skills are valuable in our education system by prioritizing them throughout, such as incorporating them into teacher preparation and assessments of learning.

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### **ACTION 2:**

**Ensure that personalized learning opportunities are designed to maximize engagement of all students, regardless of disability status.**

Learning choices should be flexible and accessible for all, with a recognition that individuals' strengths and needs differ widely.

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### **ACTION 3:**

**Provide students tangible opportunities and experiences to practice self-advocacy skills and self-determination in personalized learning.**

Students should be taught and encouraged to empower themselves, by understanding their needs and their rights, communicating them, solving problems, setting goals and engaging in active reflection.

In personalized learning, students' learning experiences – what they learn, and how, when and where they learn it – are tailored to their individual needs, skills and interests. They collaborate with teachers and sometimes with other students in taking ownership of their learning. This vision cannot be realized unless students develop the ability to understand and assert their needs, and the system responds to them. This means learners may have to stand up for themselves and communicate personal issues that affect their education and ability to learn. It means that in many cases, the mindset underlying the system must be transformed.

While the obstacles are serious, our work points the way toward needed change. We urge all stakeholders to support the action steps in this report, and we welcome your comments in this ongoing discussion. By embracing these actions, we can ensure that millions more students, including those with visible and invisible disabilities, will grow up empowered to make positive choices about their education and their lives.

# Agents of Their Own Success:

## Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination for Students With Disabilities in the Era of Personalized Learning

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It doesn't take long for people who meet Elijah Ditchendorf to recognize what makes him exceptional: Elijah is passionate about math and science, resilient in the face of challenges, and enthusiastic about how he wants to make a difference in the world. Elijah is also distinctive for another reason: He has grown up with dyslexia, a learning disability that some of his teachers have mistaken for a lack of intelligence.

His kindergarten teacher recommended that he be held back because he “wasn’t grasping the alphabet.” His sixth-grade teacher didn’t want him to take accelerated science, because she felt “he’d reached his full potential.” Other teachers expressed discomfort with Elijah participating in meetings about his own Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Fortunately, Elijah has had supports to overcome these obstacles: Starting when he was in first grade, his mother, Carolyn, insisted that he get involved in the IEP meetings. As he got older, she urged him to speak up and advocate for himself. Several teachers encouraged him to believe in his own potential, providing a vital boost in self-confidence that he could succeed in advanced science classes. Over the years, Elijah gained awareness of his future goals and identified the steps he had to take to achieve them.

His efforts are paying dividends. Today Elijah is majoring in biomedical engineering at the University of Cincinnati, an engaged college

student in pursuit of his dreams.

While Elijah is on a path to success, there are thousands, if not millions, of students like him who are not. They struggle in a one-size-fits-all system that prevents them from fulfilling their potential and shuts them out of opportunity. Too often they lack abilities that would enable them to stand up for themselves and take advantage of their learning options.



*Elijah Ditchendorf, biomedical engineering student with dyslexia at the University of Cincinnati.*

The question for policymakers and practitioners is how to change this harmful paradigm and provide all students the opportunities they need to succeed.

Personalized learning efforts have the potential to offer a way forward. In personalized learning, students' learning experiences – what they learn, and how, when and where they learn it – are tailored to their individual needs, skills and interests. Learners might show understanding of content through demonstration or performance, such as an internship or a capstone project.



Settings for teaching may vary to include the community or a job site. Student peers or community partners might serve as instructors. Through this flexible, experience-oriented approach, personalized learning encourages students to get engaged and take ownership of their learning.\*

Schools using personalized learning models should hold high expectations for all students and place paramount value on understanding student strengths. Yet NCLD's work suggests that this frequently is not the case for students with disabilities. Biases inherent in a broader underlying social power structure often create a gap between vision and reality. A schism between well-meaning policy and actual practice also emerges when teachers are committed and knowledgeable but lack the resources they need to serve all students.

Further, the mindset of educators can undermine efforts, such as when teachers focus on students' weaknesses rather than students' strengths. Educators who wittingly or unwittingly stigmatize a student with disabilities and, as a result, view that student as less able, are less inclined to offer helpful opportunities to that individual. Students themselves may internalize these low expectations, settling for less than they are capable of.

As educators implement personalized learning models, they must remain aware of these obstacles. Small tweaks to policy will not do the job. If personalized learning systems are to be inclusive and effective for all, it will take an array of actions that address biases, ensure resources and raise expectations for every learner.





## What's the relationship between self-advocacy skills and self-determination?

Self-advocacy skills are needed to achieve an empowered state of self-determination, but they are not the same. Taken together, these capacities enable people to stand up for themselves, live independent lives, make choices and get things done. Without them, individuals can easily fall through the cracks.



### Self-Advocacy Skills:

When students advocate for themselves, they apply skills to understand their rights, needs and interests, and then communicate their understanding to teachers or other decision-makers. Self-advocacy skills require awareness – of personal strengths, needs and goals. They require the ability to express what is important. They also entail abilities to initiate and maintain constructive relationships, engage in groups and work collaboratively toward common goals. Self-advocacy skills enable students to participate actively in their learning and that of others. Ultimately, they may take the form of leadership.



### Self-Determination:

When students are self-determined, they take charge of their lives, make choices in their self-interest and freely pursue their goals. Self-advocacy skills are usually needed to accomplish this level of empowerment, which optimizes choice and independence. But self-determination requires other abilities as well, including the capacity to set goals, solve problems and think critically. When students apply all the skills it takes to be their own champions, they are said to be self-determined. They can assert their will and make good things happen.

Success in personalized learning systems is strengthened when students can effectively advocate for their needs and rights, and have the capacity to be self-determined, making active and positive choices about the direction of their learning and their lives. Technology and the global economy are making self-advocacy skills and self-determination increasingly valuable for everyone. Students with disabilities may need these skills and capacities most of all.



## PRACTICE MEETS POLICY

NCLD's mission is to improve the lives of children and adults with learning and attention issues, and we have followed the emergence of personalized learning approaches with great interest. Over the last three years, NCLD has led a national effort to examine the opportunities and challenges faced by students with disabilities who participate in systems of personalized learning.

Our work began with a review of the academic literature on this growing education trend and has expanded to encourage input from an array of stakeholders around the country. We held webinars, commissioned a survey, visited sites, convened meetings with disability-rights and personalized-learning advocates, and published initial findings based on their recommendations. We conducted a rigorous analysis of efforts in three states (Colorado, New Hampshire and North Carolina), interviewed close to 100 leaders, studied individual cases and met with local, state and national audiences.

A theme that consistently emerged in discussions is that personalized learning requires students to make good choices about their

learning, assert their needs and pursue their goals in order to be successful. These skill sets are vital for all learners, but especially for students with disabilities. Yet they are not frequently taught to students, an omission that harms those who need them the most.

To address this concern, in 2017 NCLD promoted a national conversation on how to ensure that students with disabilities gain *self-advocacy* skills and capacity for *self-determination*. We adopted a research-based definition of *self-advocacy* as a set of skills based on self-knowledge, including awareness of personal strengths and limitations, knowledge of one's rights and the ability to communicate this understanding. We accepted the view of *self-determination* as an empowered state in which individuals take charge of their lives, make choices in their self-interest and freely pursue their goals.<sup>†</sup>

These capacities – along with high expectations – are crucial to success in postsecondary education and the modern workplace. They should be woven into the way all students are taught, and never considered mere “add-ons.”

These capacities – along with high expectations – are crucial to success in postsecondary education and the modern workplace. They should be woven into the way all students are taught, and never considered mere “add-ons.” Personalized learning places greater emphasis on students exercising judgment, making choices, and owning their learning. Therefore, it should explicitly teach these skills and offer many ways to support these abilities, in an environment of high expectations and respect for all.

Yet in the actual practice of education, many students are denied these opportunities, and NCLD's work suggests the opportunity gap is widening. Even when education policies lay out a student-centered approach that embraces individuality, the vision may fall short in practice. The mindset of educators can undermine well-meaning efforts to implement personalized learning, such as when teachers focus on a student's weaknesses rather than strengths. Another challenge arises from stigma and low expectations of students with disabilities, which may be held by teachers and even by students themselves.

For all these reasons, it is essential that students with disabilities learn how to be their own champions, through the exercise of self-advocacy skills and self-determination.

To support that aim, NCLD held three virtual meetings between April and June of 2017 with a group of 38 advisors, including special education experts, personalized learning specialists, practitioners, advocates, parents and students. Our work had several objectives, including: (1) defining personalized learning systems, self-advocacy skills and self-determination (see Appendix A); (2) identifying the specific skills associated with these concepts (see Appendix B); and (3) spotlighting solutions that would make personalized learning systems more inclusive and responsive to the needs of students with disabilities. A guiding principle of our effort was the importance of engaging all parties to address these challenges.

These discussions culminated in a daylong conference on August 3, 2017, where we gained



insights from a diverse array of participants on how to improve the system. Three policy and action themes emerged from this process. Taken together, they aim to ensure that students have the capacity to assert their needs and make vital choices about their education and their lives:

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### **Action 1:**

Make self-advocacy skills and self-determination critical priorities in personalized learning systems.

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### **Action 2:**

Ensure that personalized learning opportunities are designed to maximize engagement of all students, regardless of disability status.

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### **Action 3:**

Provide students tangible opportunities and experiences to practice self-advocacy skills and self-determination in personalized learning.





## ACTION 1

**Make self-advocacy skills and self-determination critical priorities in personalized learning systems.** We must communicate and demonstrate that these skills are valuable in our education system by prioritizing them throughout, such as incorporating them into states' strategic measures for success, educator preparation standards, and assessments of learning.

Given the importance of self-advocacy skills and self-determination for students' future success, these abilities cannot be considered “add-ons” to a personalized learning system. They must be taught well and treated as foundational. Their significance should be highlighted in how teachers are prepared, how the success of a school is defined, and how we help students think about and experience their learning.

Yet NCLD's examination of these issues in personalized learning systems made clear that the current policy and practice environment often stands in the way. Most educators have not been trained in how to cultivate student agency, the ability of a student to act on his own behalf and make choices about learning, as well as other aspects of life. In addition when a dedicated teacher does try to provide opportunities to develop self-advocacy skills and enhanced self-determination, these efforts may receive little support from school leaders. Students rarely get academic credit for such experience, and teachers may not receive professional credit for facilitating it. Though abilities associated with self-determination, such as goal-setting, problem-solving and decision-making, are essential to future success, they are often trivialized as “soft skills” and relegated to the back burner of academic curricula. As a result, students may leave their K–12 experience without the explicit competencies necessary to succeed in

postsecondary education, the workforce and civic life.

Properly implemented, personalized learning has the potential to transform education. But this requires careful preparation of teachers in how they support students and grant choices in their learning. It requires that educators see their role as learning facilitators who are acutely aware of each student's strengths, interests and challenges. And it calls for more ways to define and recognize those students' success. Educators must recognize students' varied learning needs and be responsive to differences in cognitive (reasoning and memory), intrapersonal (managing behavior and emotions) and interpersonal (expressing ideas and working with others) domains. (See Appendix B for a full discussion.). Learning should include a focus on explicit competencies that students will need to succeed in college, career and civic life.<sup>§</sup>

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personalized learning has  
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This matters for everyone. But it is especially important for students with disabilities, who not only may face barriers while in school but also face the loss of certain formal protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) when they complete their K–12 educations. Abilities to be proactive in expressing and advocating their needs are crucial for the entire course of their lives.

The following policy and practice recommendations can help ensure that self-advocacy skills and self-determination become higher priorities in personalized learning – and the entire education system:

### Policy recommendations:

- **State policymakers:** Incorporate the promotion of self-advocacy skills and self-determination into educator and leader preparation and professional learning standards, so that teachers, school leaders, counselors and other educators can model and teach these skills and behaviors.
- **Schools, districts and states:** Adopt capstone requirements, performance assessments and school climate surveys that support development of self-advocacy skills and self-determination in students.
- **Federal policymakers:** Emphasize the importance of promoting self-advocacy skills and self-determination in the reauthorization of IDEA through the definition of strengths-based Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

### Practice recommendations:

- **Counselors and teachers:** Incorporate goals for promoting self-advocacy skills and emphasizing self-determination in personalized

learning plans, helping students understand different pathways to achieve goals.

- **Teachers:** administer formative assessments to determine whether students are developing and demonstrating self-advocacy skills and self-determination.



## The Role of School Counselors

While all school professionals play a role in supporting student development of self-advocacy skills and self-determination, the field of school counseling inherently embraces these ideas and incorporates them into its best practices and professional standards. In particular, the American School Counselor Association’s “ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K–12 College and Career Readiness Standards for Every Student” are centered on three domains – **academic, college and career readiness, and social/emotional** – that rely on students building a foundation of these important abilities. Key standards focus on:

- **Mindset:** The attitudes and beliefs students have about themselves in relation to their academics; and
- **Behavior:** Outward signs that a student is engaged in learning, including tactics to aid student learning, self-management and persistence, and social interactions with peers and adults.

Read more at [ncl.org/counselors](https://ncl.org/counselors).



## ACTION 2

**Ensure that personalized learning opportunities are designed to maximize engagement of all students, regardless of disability status.** Learning choices should be accessible for all, with a recognition that individuals' strengths and needs differ widely.

Students approach and demonstrate their learning in many different ways. Learning opportunities should be offered in a manner that is accessible to students regardless of gender, race, cultural background or disability status. Only then can students be expected to take ownership of their learning and begin exercising agency – the ability to make real choices about how they learn, the pace they learn, how they demonstrate learning, and how to tie their learning to long-term goals.

An accessible education system gives students different means to have their content represented, engaged with and demonstrated. It honors essential tenets of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), such as the recognition that students differ in how they process information. It also provides students with mentors and a support system to help navigate their opportunities.

### Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for educators to remove barriers and give all students an opportunity to learn. UDL is based on three principals that ensure flexibility in how students access material, engage with it, and show what they've learned.

If the system does not prioritize accessibility and engagement for all, students may find it impossible to exercise self-advocacy skills. For example, students with dysgraphia, a learning disability in writing, cannot show what they've learned when written communication is the only acceptable way to demonstrate their learning. A blind student doesn't have a real choice in exploring topics of interest if their chosen content isn't presented through speech, text or Braille conversion technologies. Moreover, disability status is not the only barrier students might face in seeking to advocate for themselves and pursue their goals as a 21st century learner: discrimination based on culture, race, gender and other identities can present additional challenges to full participation. When combined with a disability, these challenges only compound the existing physical, emotional, and cognitive barriers to learning.

Implementing a personalized learning system doesn't by itself address all issues of engagement and accessibility. Meaningful engagement of and accessibility for all students should be incorporated into system design from the start. Instruction to help students build self-advocacy skills and self-determination should be personalized, scaffolded, age-appropriate and culturally sensitive. Yet students with disabilities often find that they are retrofitted into personalized learning systems and other education reform efforts as an afterthought.

## The Importance of Inclusion, Communication and Cultural Competences

How students develop the varied capacities needed to stand up for themselves, make choices and effectively pursue their goals is influenced by a complex set of factors that varies with each individual. These may include a student's specific disability, age, race, gender, culture, experiences with trauma and other personal influences. For those learning English, this means navigating linguistic and, potentially, cultural challenges at the intersection of their need for self-advocacy. Differences in cultural norms or expectations can create unintended gaps between students' experience and their ability to effectively advocate for themselves.

As convening participant and UnidosUS Data and Impact Manager, Lucerito Ortiz, notes:

*"It is not sufficient to simply 'empower' students and parents with these skills, then sit back and wait for them to be used in order for student voices to be represented; rather, relationships must be cultivated and conversations must be proactive and ongoing. The default relationships should not be one of 'demands' and 'entitlement' on a family's behalf, but rather one of continuous communication and mutual learning. In this manner, the development of cultural competence and sensitivity in educators will be of paramount importance in making sure students of all backgrounds can grow and leverage their self-advocacy skills and have their voices heard."*

This caution is a reminder of how important it is to recognize and respect the complexity of this work. Students who need these capacities may have multiple disabilities and come from cultural backgrounds that differ from those of their teachers. Proactive conversations and ongoing relationships involving students, parents and teachers will be essential. Cultural competence and a constructive mindset on the part of educators, including sensitivity to the dangers of stigma, is crucial.

Learning environments become more inclusive when they validate students for who they are, support them in understanding themselves and make it a priority to engage students and their families in these efforts.

Guaranteeing real opportunity for students to develop the skills required for self-advocacy and self-determination will require changes in education policy and practice, and a commitment from key stakeholders. Policymakers and practitioners can take the following steps to help achieve needed change:

### **Policy recommendations:**

- **Federal, state and district policymakers:** Adopt Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a lens for evaluating personalized learning initiatives to ensure accessibility of learning, especially in curriculum, assessment design and professional development.

- **District and state leaders:** Ensure that any resources used to support personalized learning and the processes used to obtain those resources (such as RFPs and procurement contracts) are designed to meet accessibility standards and will allow all students to fully participate in their learning and exercise self-determination.

### Practice recommendations:

- **Educators:** Meet -- with the support of the administration and reflecting a collaborative

school culture -- to develop plans for incorporating UDL into personalized learning efforts to ensure inclusion of all students in learning opportunities.

- **Schools and school leaders:** develop peer and adult mentoring and coaching programs that can help students make decisions about in-school and extracurricular learning opportunities, while supporting students who are developing self-advocacy skills and practicing self-determination.



## How Two Teachers Promote Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills in the Classroom

**Ann Yenne**, a veteran teacher at Trailblazer Elementary School in Colorado Springs, Colorado, knows the importance of self-determination, and gives her students opportunities to exercise it in her classroom. She creates focus groups so students can communicate their learning needs to her, and she instructs them on how to set goals for themselves, work together to solve problems and practice different strategies to achieve their goals. These supports are all the more important for success at Trailblazer Elementary School, which is implementing competency-based, personalized learning – where students are expected to make choices about where, when and how they learn.

To learn more about Trailblazer Elementary School and Ann's story go to: [www.ncld.org/AnnsStory](http://www.ncld.org/AnnsStory)

**Michael Williams**, a high school history teacher at Warren New Tech High School in rural Warrenton, North Carolina, wants his students to gain self-advocacy skills. At the start of major projects, he initiates “need to know” sessions where students, including those with disabilities, meet with him and communicate what’s on their minds. These sessions create a secure space for students to express their needs and goals for the learning experience, and ask whatever questions they may have. Williams also sets up multiple “checkpoints” throughout the life of a project to encourage further self-advocacy skills and self-awareness. Students use these moments to reflect on their experiences and needs, and to say whether they require extra supports to complete their work.

Learn more about the implementation of project-based learning and Warren New Tech at: [www.ncld.org/WarrenNewTech](http://www.ncld.org/WarrenNewTech)





## ACTION 3

**Provide students tangible opportunities and experiences to practice self-advocacy skills and self-determination in personalized learning.** Students should be taught and encouraged to empower themselves, by understanding their needs and their rights, communicating them, solving problems and setting goals.

Few individuals automatically develop the level of self-awareness and mental skills to fully understand their strengths and weaknesses, set ambitious and practical short- and long-term goals, or stand up for themselves and communicate their needs to authority figures. Yet these skills are needed for future success in higher education, employment and civic life.

Students should be taught and encouraged to empower themselves, by understanding their needs and their rights, communicating them, and pursuing goals that will lead to high achievement and success in college or career. Taking concrete steps to support development of these skills can lead to a paradigm shift in education.

Policies and practices can provide students access to applied learning experiences, both in and out of school, that they find relevant and consequential. The following actions can give students crucial support:

### **Policy recommendations:**

- **State legislatures and state boards of education:** Adopt policies that set rigorous standards for high-quality learning opportunities such as work-based learning and service-learning and grant students academic credit for out-of-school learning opportunities that meet those standards and align with explicit competencies.



### **Maryland's Service-Learning Requirement for High School Seniors**

State policies can promote experiences that help students assert themselves, increase competence and make self-aware choices in school and beyond. To receive a diploma, each Maryland senior must complete a service-learning project that meets seven state-defined best practices. A number of these elements – including developing student responsibility, establishing community partnerships, reflection, and planning – support self-advocacy skills and the ability to lead self-determined lives.

### **Practice Recommendations:**

- **Schools:** Provide opportunities for students to participate and eventually lead IEP and transition meetings so that each opportunity becomes a learning experience
- **Educators:** Provide explicit instruction on strategies for students to apply their self-advocacy skills and self-determination, including using and assessing communication, goal-setting and critical thinking skills.

### **Agents of Their Own Success:**



## EVERYONE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY ACTIONS TO ADVANCE SELF-DETERMINATION IN PERSONALIZED LEARNING SYSTEMS

It will take more than educators and policy-makers alone to bring our empowering and inclusive vision of personalized learning to fruition. All stakeholders in the education system play a role in making it a reality. Students must believe in the importance of these skills. Families can help students develop confidence and think more deeply about their learning needs and goals. Community partners can work with schools to provide students real-world experiences that nurture self-determination. Teachers can confront their own biases and dispel stigma.

Here are 10 steps that – when taken as part of a collaborative effort by all stakeholders – can promote self-advocacy skills and self-determination for all students:

**Students:** Take ownership. Consider your current capacity, use a personalized learning plan to set goals, engage in IEP and transition meetings, and learn more about your disabilities and rights.

**Families:** Learn from educators how you can support the school's efforts to help your student develop self-advocacy skills and self-determination. Participate in meetings with your child's school and voice your support for instruction that helps students develop self-advocacy skills and self-determination. Work collaboratively with teachers to provide students real-world opportunities to advocate for their own needs and preferences.

**Employer and Community Partners:** Work with schools to provide rigorous and relevant work-based and service-learning opportunities that give students ways to practice the skills required for competent, independent and effective lives.





## EVERYONE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY

**Teachers:** Provide explicit instruction on self-advocacy skills and self-determination and use tools and assessments to gauge your students' progress.

**School Counselors:** Work with students and teachers to develop personalized learning plans, emphasizing positive experiences that encourage developing self-advocacy skills and self-determination.

**School Leaders:** Adopt peer and adult mentoring programs in your school that support students with disabilities in personalized learning efforts as they develop these abilities.

**School District Administrators:** Ensure that commitment to Universal Design for Learning is built into your procurement process, and communicate this priority to your vendors.

**Higher Education Partners:** Expand the nation's capacity to support self-advocacy skills and self-determination by making these values an important part of training for teachers and leaders.

**State Policymakers:** Adopt policies that allow students to receive academic credit for out-of-school learning opportunities that meet high standards of rigor.

**Federal Policymakers:** Emphasize the importance of self-advocacy skills in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, through the definition of strengths-based Individualized Education Programs.







## MOVING FORWARD: FURTHERING SELF-ADVOCACY AND SELF-DETERMINATION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

**It would be difficult to overstate the importance of self-advocacy skills and enhanced self-determination. Students who advocate for themselves gain all the advantages that come from knowing their needs and rights, and being able to communicate them to people in authority. Students who act to achieve their goals gain the advantages of self-determination and control over their lives.**

For students with disabilities, these skills and capacities are critically important. Elijah, for example, depends on them regularly in college. He routinely schedules meetings with university officials to identify accommodations he may need. In response, he has gotten extra time for tests, permission to take tests in a separate room and assistance from a reader. His example shows that the successful exercise of self-advocacy skills and self-determination can lead to further success and more self-confidence. When Elijah sought out a faculty member to help clarify his learning goals, he was rewarded with a research assistantship.

Yet Elijah is an exception. The self-advocacy skills and self-determination he embodies are not a priority in education. But the movement for personalized learning presents a ripe opportunity to move in this direction and shift the paradigm. Implemented with care, personalized learning efforts can promote high expectations and respect for every student.

While personalized learning does not carry with it a guarantee of success in promoting self-advocacy skills and self-determination, its basic promise is consistent with these goals. It invites us to change how all learners are engaged and



We must also ensure that educators, families, and students set high expectations and that each student is offered rigorous learning opportunities, tailored to his or her strengths and needs, that will lead to success after high school.

better prepared for the challenges and opportunities they will face after their K–12 education.

The action strategies in this report offer a road map to a more inclusive and responsive education system. We must also ensure that educators, families, and students set high expectations and that each student is offered rigorous learning opportunities, tailored to his or her strengths and needs, that will lead to success after high school. Given the growing reliance on personalized learning efforts throughout the country, these issues call out for attention.

Our level of commitment may well dictate the next chapter of progress for the disability-rights movement. By embracing these action strategies, we can ensure that millions more students, including those with visible and invisible disabilities, will grow up empowered to make positive choices about their education and their lives.





## APPENDIX A – DEFINING KEY TERMS: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

### Personalized learning

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An educational learning approach in which students' learning experiences – what they learn, and how, when and where they learn it – are tailored to their individual needs, skills, and interests, enabling them to take ownership of their learning. Although where, how and when they learn might vary according to their needs, students also develop deep connections to each other, their teachers and other adults.<sup>1</sup>

### Self-advocacy skills

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A concept related to student empowerment defined by four elements:

1. Knowledge of self,
2. Knowledge of rights,
3. Communication of one's knowledge of self and rights, and
4. Leadership where a person moves from individual self-advocacy to advocating for others as a group of individuals with common concerns.<sup>2</sup>

### Self-determination

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A dispositional characteristic manifested as acting as the causal agent in one's life. Self-determined people (i.e., causal agents) act in service to freely chosen goals. Self-determined actions function to enable a person to be the causal agent in his or her life.<sup>3</sup>

### Student agency

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In this context, agency is the ability of students to make choices about their learning. Exercising agency can lead to increased feelings of competence, self-control, self-advocacy and self-determination.

### Students with disabilities

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Refers to students identified as having one or more of the 13 types of disabilities included under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These include specific learning disabilities (like dyslexia or dyscalculia), speech or language impairment, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, and other disabilities. Public school students identified as having a disability under IDEA receive special education and related services to meet their unique needs and make progress in school.



## APPENDIX A, CONTINUED

### Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

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A framework for educators to remove barriers and give all students an opportunity to learn. UDL is based on three principals that ensure flexibility in how students access material, engage with it, and show what they've learned. The UDL principles and guidelines direct educational decision-making and allow higher levels of learning for all students. A school implementing UDL presents content, assesses learning, and engages students in multiple ways..

- <sup>1</sup> Shogren, K.A., Wehmeyer, M.L., Palmer, S.B., Forber-Pratt, A., Little, T., & Lopez, S.. Causal agency theory: Reconceptualizing a functional model of self-determination. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*.
- <sup>2</sup> Test, D.W., Fowler, C.H, Wood, W.M., Brewer, D.M., & Eddy, S. A conceptual framework of self-advocacy for students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*. Vol. 26. No. 1. 43–54.
- <sup>3</sup> Students at the Center overview: Engaging all students in college, career, and civic success. (Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future, 2013)
- <sup>§</sup> National Research Council. (2012). *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*. Committee on Defining Deeper Learning and 21st Century Skills, James W. Pellegrino and Margaret L. Hilton, Editors. Board on Testing and Assessment and Board on Science Education, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- <sup>\*</sup> Throughout the text our conception of personalized learning is informed by Students at the Center overview: Engaging all students in college, career, and civic success. (Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future, 2013)
- <sup>†</sup> Throughout the text our conceptions of self-advocacy skills and self-determination are informed by research-based definitions presented in Test et. al 2005 and Shogren et. al 2015, respectively.



## APPENDIX B

As discussions among our national experts unfolded, specific skill sets within the self-advocacy and self-determination constructs emerged as being important to student success in personalized learning systems. These skills correlate to three domains: the cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. These were first identified by the National Research Council report, *Education for Life and Work*, as essential to the success of all students in the 21st century. Skills and competencies associated with the cognitive domain relate to how students set goals, solve problems, and navigate resources. Those in the intrapersonal domain relate to how students perceive themselves and regulate their behaviors and emotions. And finally, those in the interpersonal domain relate to how they communicate and work with others.

The development and exercise of skills in these three domains will vary from student to student, depending on their particular disability and circumstance. With appropriate accommodations, all students can exercise some or all of these skills in ways that further their goals and contribute to their success.

### **Cognitive Domain: Reasoning and memory**

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- Goal-setting
- Decision-making and problem-solving
- Navigating resources and educational opportunities

### **Intrapersonal Domain: Managing behavior and emotions to achieve one's goals**

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- Self-awareness and self-assessment
- Metacognition
- Confidence
- Self-regulation
- Cognitive reappraisal and growth mindset

### **Interpersonal Domain: Expressing ideas and working with others**

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- Capacity to initiate, establish and maintain relationships
- Collaboration
- Communicating learning preferences, interests and needs
- Leadership and followership



## APPENDIX C

The views expressed in this publication reflect the views of the National Center for Learning Disabilities and the report's authors. NCLD would like to thank the many individuals who participated in various discussions and convenings that informed this report.

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